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Repercussions Embarrass Reds

Warsaw Trial of American Writer Puts Intellectual Freedom in Dock

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The Washington Post Foreign Service

WARSAW, Nov. 15.—Intellectual freedom in this Communist-run country has been symbolically on trial with Polish-American writer Melchior Wankowicz, and like Wankowicz it is for the moment under sentence.

By all indications, Polish Communist leader Wladyslaw Gomulka ordered the arrest of Wankowicz as a warning to intellectuals who had protested against the increasing repression of the regime.

But the effect of Wankowicz's trial and conviction on

charges of "slanderizing Poland that material he had sent abroad" could be merely to

whet dissatisfactions. Many Communists concede frankly that the whole affair was a bad mistake, and one official privately terms it "stupid" in terms of its repercussions.

So embarrassed is the government that it has approached Wankowicz secretly with an offer to let him leave the country. He has refused.

Wankowicz, 72, was sentenced last Monday to three years' imprisonment in a court proceeding that had cloak-and-dagger overtones. Among the accusations was

Poland by Radio Free Europe.

Half his sentence was remitted because of an amnesty last July after the alleged offense was committed. Wankowicz is now free pending appeal.

The case goes back to the courageous letter sent to Premier Josef Cyrankiewicz last March 14 by 34 intellectuals who complained about sharpened censorship and limitations on paper supplies to publications out of official favor. The complaint was amply borne out by many individual frustrations.

Among the signers was Wankowicz, a naturalized American citizen who is simultaneously a leading Polish author. A popular Polish writer before World War II, Wankowicz was sentenced to death in absentia by the Nazis, obtained American citizenship in 1956 and returned here in 1958 to plunge into Polish affairs.

Government Displeased

Publication of the letter abroad made the government extremely unhappy, and various pressures were brought upon the less secure among the signers.

Although some stood their ground, 22 of the 34 subsequently said they had not intended their protest to be used as anti-Polish propaganda.

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But Wankowicz did not recant. Instead he prepared a strong speech for a congress of Polish writers in Lublin on June 28, making a number of copies.

He distributed several of these to friends here. Another he sent through an intermediary to his daughter in Washington, Mrs. Jan Erdman, whose husband works for the United States Information Agency.

The speech itself was never delivered, but the substance was broadcast by Radio Free Europe, with no indication of how RFE obtained a copy. Officials here insist that Wankowicz sent a copy to his daughter with the intent that it would be passed on.

Woman Speaks

Although Wankowicz himself did not speak at the Lublin writers' congress, the grande dame of Polish letters, Maria Dombrowska, made a speech setting forth the views of the 34 and incorporating some of Wankowicz's points.

Then came another meeting of writers on Oct. 5, at which a top-ranking Polish Communist, Zenon Kliszko, denounced them for lending themselves to propaganda.

Almost as the writers were meeting, Wankowicz was arrested and charged with slander. Every sign pointed to the conclusion that the regime had previously determined to make him an example.

It is known that Gomulka personally ordered the arrest, explaining in effect that Wankowicz had broken Polish law and that there could not be one law for ordinary citizens and another for writers.

Wankowicz may have been technically guilty under Polish law. Because of the role he

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had chosen to play in Polish affairs, the American Embassy had good grounds for a strong protest.
Defendant Has Counsel

The defendant was represented by counsel, and the trial was nominally public, although admission was by ticket only. American consul Walter B. Smith obtained a ticket only after making a vigorous demand. American journalists were excluded altogether.

The only witness against Wankowicz was one Tadeusz Cibor, not otherwise identified, who testified in closed session. It has been established, however, that Cibor was listed as second secretary at the Polish Embassy in Washington until last June.

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Observers here speculate that Cibor was in fact an agent of the Polish Ministry of the Interior, which operates the secret police, and that he somehow betrayed the confidence of Mrs. Erdman—though how a copy of Wankowicz's speech got to Radio Free Europe has not been publicly explained.

In any event Wankowicz said openly at his trial that "A Polish intelligence agent was closer to my daughter than my daughter was to Radio Free Europe."

He also said in court that "this is the only forum in Poland today in which the truth can be told."

Writing Restrained

Wankowicz may have exaggerated. Restraints on the written word are many and onerous, but the plastic arts are relatively free and there is plenty of verbal criticism.

It is the trend, however, that worries men like Wankowicz, who was attracted back to Poland in the exciting expectations of liberalization after the almost bloodless 1956 revolution that cast off the rigid Soviet grip.

For such hopes the present outlook is unquestionably bleak. Some of the more optimistic here contend that there can be no going back to the conditions before 1956 and that the current confinement is only a zag in a necessarily zigzag development.

Meanwhile Poland's Communist government, which has been squirming uncomfortably and doubtless would like to forget the whole Wankowicz case, may find that it has a willing martyr of its own making on its hands.

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